

Testing Spoken English: As a Second Language

By Shreesh Chaudhary

Teaching and testing Spoken English (SE) has an old history. In the early 1800s Carey (1906; cited in Sinha 1978:22) advertised that at his school near Calcutta, “particular attention will be paid to the pronunciation” of English.

Teaching elocution, rhetoric, or SE, has until recently been an integral a part of the school curriculum. But as demand for English has grown and properly trained people have become scarce, clear goals and models have also disappeared as have the teaching and testing of SE except as an extra-curricular activity, even in countries like India.

“Speaking,” as Harris (1977:81) observes, “is a complex skill requiring the simultaneous use of different abilities which often develop at different rates....Five components are generally recognized in analyses of the speech process.” Harris lists them as follows:

1. a. Pronunciation including segmental features, vowels and consonants, and the stress and intonation patterns
- b. Grammar
- c. Vocabulary
- d. Fluency
- e. Comprehension.

Of these, pronunciation is the most difficult to assess.

“The central reason is the lack of general agreement on what good pronunciation of a second language means: Is comprehensibility to be the sole basis of judgment, or must we demand a high degree of phonetic and allophonic accuracy? And can we be certain that two or more native speakers will find the utterance of a foreign speaker equally comprehensible...?” (Harris 1977:81).

Tonkyn (1992) presents a good overview of this confusion about what may be called dimensions of oral proficiency. He examines rating scales like the ones used by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL), Australian Second Language Proficiency Ratings (ASLPR), the British Council/University of Cambridge English Language Testing Service (ELTS), the British Council’s Mini- Platform Interview (MPI) scale, etc.

After examining these scales, Tonkyn (1992:154–55) observes, “...a workable three-part profile might be produced concentrating on three separately rated overall factors, which I shall call accuracy, range, and strategic competence....”

Tonkyn defines accuracy in terms of grammatical and pronunciation features requiring two different scales: range in terms of vocabulary and grammatical complexity; and strategic competence in terms of fluency. He, however, admits that, “we need to listen to a lot more examples of oral performance to validate this, or any alternative, profile” (p.155).

There has been little work on testing SE. Brown (1992:15) says, “Since the inception of the journal *Language Testing* in 1984 only one article has appeared specifically on the topic of pronunciation testing.” The writer of that article, R. Major (1987:155), feels, “The measurement of pronunciation accuracy is in the dark ages when compared to measurement of other areas of competence.” The present paper seeks to fill this gap.

Concept of “Good” SE for ESL

In SE, the distinction between ESL and English as a foreign language (EFL) seems significant. As Brown (1992:3) notes, “In ESL situations English has official status, is used widely in government, is the medium of education, and is in widespread use in everyday life of the people. In contrast, (in EFL) English in official situations has low recognition and is used mainly for communication with foreigners....” These differences have implications for teaching and testing.

Many features in (1) or in Tonkyn’s scales may be redundant for English in India, where it is a second rather than a foreign language. In ESL, pronunciation requires attention. An ESL speaker has relatively little difficulty with grammar, vocabulary and fluency. Regarding Indian English, Bansal (1973:1) says, “...in pronunciation it is very different from either British or American English and even within India there are a large number of regional varieties, each different from the others in certain ways and retaining to some extent the phonetic patterns of the Indian languages spoken in that particular region.”

As a listener, Wells (1982:624) feels, there are Indians educated at British public schools whose accent is unquestionably RP. There are Indians with a fair knowledge of English whose accent is nevertheless so impenetrable that English people can understand them, if at all, only with the greatest difficulty.

So there is a need for teaching and testing SE, but there is no agreement as to what “good” pronunciation is. In this it is unlike Written English (WE). All teachers agree that in teaching writing they must teach spelling, punctuation, and format such as leaving space before and after every word.

In the absence of a similar agreement on pronunciation, teaching and testing SE isn’t so objective. It is sometimes argued that there is no need to teach SE (e.g., Kachru 1988, Nadkarni 1992), or that standard English e.g., Received Pronunciation (RP) is the ideal model (Quirk 1990). But RP itself, as Shibbes (1995) shows, is no monolith nor is General American (GA) (see Wells 1982). Natural languages do not work in this way.

Fortunately, there have been efforts on varieties labeled variously as “minimum essential,” “minimum adequate” (West 1968), “Rudimentary International Pronunciation (RIP) (Gimson

1978), “essential ingredients,” (Bradford 1996), etc. These features constitute the relatively unchanging core of its phonology, which spans centuries and countries.

In pronunciation, according to West (1968: 205), “What is of vital importance is rhythm, the strong regular beat of English stresses which makes Welshmen, Scotsmen, and all native English speakers intelligible to each other, in spite of their very different vowel systems....”

Absence of a “strong regular beat of English stress” marks non-standard non-native accents of English, though these varieties also differ among themselves. Most “standard” varieties (Wells 1982:34) differ from other varieties in the following:

2. a. Phrasal pause
- b. Word stress
- c. Vowel length
- d. Some consonantal contrasts.

In “standard” varieties syllables are gathered in groups of stressed and some stressless syllables, groups usually co-terminous with a phrase. Standard varieties stress over 808 words alike (Sack 1968). This gives them a unique rhythm.

Vowel quality differs with dialect; its quantity rarely does. For instance, *dame* is pronounced like *dime* in Australia; *bomb* like *balm*, *court* like *caught* by many RP speakers; and *cheer* like *chair* by some in New Zealand. But they all have a diphthong or long vowel.

Historically, vowel quality has changed more than vowel quantity. *Sea* was spoken like *say* by Londoners in the days of Shakespeare. Preferred pronunciation of *great* in the days of Dr. Johnson rhymed with *greet* rather than with *grate*. Standard varieties have eight diphthongs and seven long vowels, the largest number of long vowel sounds in the world.

Likewise, contrasts between voiced and voiceless, or between /l/ and /r/, etc., or fricative consonants, of which English has nine, have remained relatively unchanged.

A rapid rate of speech obstructs ESL speakers’ comprehensibility. Powers (1985) reports that a tempo of over 275 words per minute can make one unintelligible. Usha (1995) has shown that a tempo of four syllables per second may be ideal for comprehensibility. So in my course (See Chaudhary 1993) I include the following:

3. a. Slow tempo of speech
- b. Phrasal pause
- c. Word stress
- d. Long vowels
- e. Fricative consonants

I also include pronunciation of the following:

4. a. Numbers
- b. Names of days, date, month, etc.
- c. Letters of English alphabet
- d. Weights and measures, etc.

My overall goal is comprehensibility, for which accuracy in word stress, length of vowels and some consonants seems essential.

Design of Test

To include items in (3) and (4) so that the test can be administered and scored objectively and easily is difficult. The test must also combine comprehensibility with phonetic accuracy, and, as Gimson (1980:327) adds, “performance in a situation of free discourse.” A good test for SE, it seems, must include the following:

5. a. Free discourse to check intelligibility and acceptability
- b. Atomistic test to check
 1. word stress through word lists read aloud
 2. phonetic accuracy in some vowels and consonants.

For my course for senior undergraduate students, many of whom go to America as teaching assistants, or work for big Indian and foreign companies, I design the test (See Figure 1 below) on the basis of the principles in (5). The first two questions check tempo of speech, extemporaneous expression, pronunciation of numbers, letters of the English alphabet and other items which occur frequently in SE. The third question checks phrasal pauses. It has two reading passages. These passages (See Figure 1), from Gimson (1978), have most vowel and consonant sounds of standard varieties. Examinees read the passages silently before reading a passage aloud for evaluation. It also involves atomistic tests of vowels and consonants.

A list of bi-, tri-, and poly-syllabic words is used for testing word stress. Words are arranged at random. A word with main stress on the initial syllable may be printed next to one with main stress on the final syllable, which may be followed by another with main stress elsewhere. The list has 20 bisyllabic, 20 trisyllabic, 20 of four syllables and some polysyllabic words. They represent major stress patterns of English (See Chomsky and Halle 1968).

The last question has minimal or sub-minimal pairs of words to test the production of diphthongs, long vowels and some consonants known to be difficult for many Indian speakers.

This test is easily administered. As the student reads a text aloud, the examiner can mark time, pauses, stresses, and make note of vowel and consonantal quality, and award grades later. Students’ speech is recorded along with the time taken by them.

Credit is given for slow tempo. A test of such a test would be to see if the student with the highest score is also the best understood.

Intelligibility Study and Evaluation of TSE

This test has been used for relative grading and comprehensibility of English spoken by ESL learners from the Indian sub-continent.

On a relative scale scores ranged from 66% to 99%. The examinee with a score of only 66% did not pause systematically, had at least three pairs of unclear sound contrasts, and misstressed at least 25 of the 66 words given for the test. The examinee with a score of 99% had regular pauses, “correct” stress on all words, and got most sound contrasts right. The examinee scoring only 66% erred in word stress, and had erratic and unclear segmental contrasts and pauses. There were 29 examinees, and their average score was approximately 90%.

From an earlier test, recordings of some students’ SE were played to a randomly selected group of listeners. Relative grades of these students were borne out almost without change (See Figure 2 below). The student with the highest score, call him G(A), was heard by 129 listeners, who were asked to fill in the 15 blanks in the given text after hearing G(A). One hundred and fifteen listeners filled in 14 blanks correctly, which is about 90% listeners filling nearly 90% blanks correctly.

The student with the lowest score, call her L(A), was heard by 62 listeners who were asked to fill in the 15 blanks in the text after hearing her. Of these only 35 listeners filled in a maximum of 10 blanks correctly. Only 60% listeners heard more than 60% of the text correctly.

To further test this model of the course and the test, we played two recordings of the highest achiever to an international group of listeners. The text, given in Figure 2, was taken from O’Connor (1980). The first recording was made on the first day of the course, (we will call it G[B]), and the second recording (we will call it G[A]) was made on the last day of the course.

For this test there were 18 listeners from Indian Ocean countries including seven from India itself. Listening to G(B) none of the students could fill in more than 14 of the 28 blanks. Only five listeners could fill in over 10 blanks. Most could fill in only between five and nine blanks correctly. G(B) was understood no better by the Indians—one of whom could fill in 14 blanks; others filled in between one and six blanks only.

The second recording, G(A), however, was understood much better. Of the 27 blanks on the sheet, no one filled in less than two. Six listeners filled in over 21 blanks, and 16 filled in over 15 blanks correctly.

This improvement in intelligibility can be attributed mainly to the change in the tempo of speech. G(B) speaks at an average tempo of over five syllables per second, whereas G(A) has a tempo of less than three syllables per second.

Conclusion

This course and accompanying test appear to be appropriate for teaching SE in India. The design of the test for objective and valid evaluation of tempo of speech and standard word stress seems adequate. But teaching and testing of pauses and segments require further refining.

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Figure 1

HS 337: Better Spoken English / End Semester Examination

(Figures in brackets indicate marks for each question)

1. Briefly speak (about) the following into the microphone in the accent and at the speed you have been advised on this course to use. (5)

1. Your Name 2. Roll No. & Branch 3. Career Plans

2. Speak briefly, for about a minute or so, on the role of an engineer in a developing society. (5)

3. First read the given passages silently, and then read either of these aloud. (10)

A young man in a curious beige hat and a blue shirt got out of the car, looked up the road and waited. Before long, three other men arrived in their lorry and joined him. They stood chatting so loudly that a few words reached my ears.

Dense fog now covers the whole of Southern England, with visibility at a maximum of eighty meters. The airports of Heathrow and Gatwick are unlikely to receive incoming flights until approximately 11:00 hours. Airplanes are being diverted to Manchester, Prestwick and Paris.

4. Read the following words aloud paying particular attention to the syllable containing main stress. (22)

academic, adolescence, admit, afraid, agent, almost, anarchy, antecedent, anticipate, aristocracy, available, begin, between, career, calamity, centenary, cement, certificate, continue, chandelier, conveyance, committee, commentary, consider, component, consider, demonstrative, diminish, despicable, defense, diminish, degree, defer, divergence, economics, enough, engineer, executive, edition, fanatic, forget, geology, govern, imperative, intermittent, instead, maintain, preparatory, possibility, idea, participate, professor, refer, regret, repetitive, scientific, sincere, syllabus, superfluous, sympathy, television, tribunal, theory, unity, vacation

5. Read the following words aloud paying attention to each vowel and consonant sound in them. (5)

vain wain feign fail van wan • vase was face fast vast waste • vail wail vent went

Figure 2

From O'Connor, 1980. (Blanks have been shown through underlining)

Part A / G (B)

I have needed some new bookshelves for a long time. So during my holiday I

decided to tackle the job myself. Not that I am very clever with my hands, but it did not seem too difficult and as I had already said that we could not afford to go away I thought it would be prudent not to spend money having it done professionally. I bought the wood at the local handicraft shop and I had plenty of screws, but I found that my old saw, which had been left behind by the previous owner of the house, was not good enough and I decided to buy a new one. That was my first mistake. My second was to go to the biggest iron monger in London and ask for a saw. You would think it was simple, wouldn't you, to buy a saw. But it is not.

Part B / G (A)

I said to the man behind the counter, "I want a saw." He was a nice man and did his best for me. "Yes, Sir, but we have fifteen different kinds for different jobs. What did you want it for?" I explained about my bookshelves and felt like an ignorant fool in a world of experts, which was true. He saw that I was a novice and was very kind. He told me what I should need and advised me to have a ladies' size. "Easier to manage for the beginner, Sir." He was not being nasty just helpful and I felt grateful to him. He also sold me a book on woodwork for schoolboys, and I've been reading it with great interest. The next time I am on a holiday I shall start on the shelves.